

# **Executive Summary**

## **Introduction**

The Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) addresses seven outcomes for children and families in the areas of safety, permanency, and child and family well-being, and seven systemic factors related to the State's ability to serve children and families effectively. The CFSR is conducted jointly by the State and the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Department of Health and Human Services. The sources of information that the State and Federal government use to evaluate the outcomes and systemic factors include statewide aggregate data, the State child welfare agency's collaborative statewide self assessment, interviews with representatives of the State child welfare agency and other child and family serving representatives in the State, and interviews and case record reviews for cases served by the State child welfare agency.

The on-site portion of the Child and Family Services Review for the state of Arkansas was conducted during the week of July 9-13, 2001. The period under review was April 1, 2001 through the date of the onsite review. Statewide data on foster care used in the review were drawn from Federal fiscal year 1999, and safety data were based on calendar year 1999. The on-site review was the culmination of more than six months of work by the staff of the Arkansas Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and ACF. Prior to the onsite review, the DCFS prepared a statewide assessment that evaluated its strengths and areas needing improvement in serving children and families.

The onsite review team consisted of a diverse group of human services professionals with backgrounds in developing, delivering and evaluating services for children and families. The team included staff of the DCFS, other representatives of the State of Arkansas who are not DCFS staff, and Federal representatives. The team reviewed 50 cases and interviewed more than 200 representatives of the DCFS and other child and family serving agencies and organizations in three sites in the State. Community stakeholders who were identified by the state were also interviewed and their comments are incorporated into the report as support to the issues revealed through the case record review. These stakeholders provided both positive feedback regarding services to families and children as well as expressions of concerns regarding some parts of the service delivery system.

## **Summary of Findings**

The final report is provided to summarize the results of the state's performance on the national data standards and the on-site review portions of the Child and Family Services Review process. For most of the indicators there are both strengths and areas needing improvement that have been identified. However, a finding regarding the substantial conformity to each of the seven outcomes is based on the results of the case record

review and the state's performance in regards to the six national data standards that have been established as part of the Child and Family Services Review.

There has been an effort to avoid recommendations as part of the summary of findings. The identification of specific solutions that will affect outcomes will be the focus of the program improvement planning phase of the Child and Family Services Review that will be discussed at the end of the executive summary.

The review determined that the State is operating in substantial conformity on one of the seven outcomes, the safety outcome that children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect. The strengths of the agency's practice in this outcome include initiating investigations of reports of child maltreatment on a timely basis and efforts to prevent repeat maltreatment of children. Although the remaining six outcomes were determined not to be in substantial conformity, the review team identified a number of strengths in those outcomes including the agency's efforts to maintain important family relationships for children in foster care, to keep children in their communities when foster care placements are necessary, and to provide independent living services to teenage children in foster care.

The review also identified a number of areas needing improvement in the outcomes, including a need for increased services to maintain children safely in their homes when possible and appropriate, a need to reduce foster care re-entries, to reduce the number of moves for children while they are in foster care, to establish permanency goals for children promptly and move toward achieving the goals in a timely manner, and to preserve the connections that children have to their communities and backgrounds. The team identified a need for the State to strengthen its needs assessments for children and families and to provide services based on those assessments in order to decrease the risk of future maltreatment. While the review team observed positive practices in these areas in some cases, practice was not consistent across cases and the three sites reviewed.

The Families in Need of Supervision (FINS) cases had a significant effect on the results of the on-site review, since they represent at least one-fourth of the DCFS caseload. The courts often refer these cases to the DCFS so that specific services can be provided. Although the DCFS is diligent in carrying out the mandates of the court, the review team identified a need to strengthen the assessment of risk-related issues in a number of these cases.

With regard to the systemic factors, the review determined that the state is operating in substantial conformity in all seven of the areas reviewed. Among the many positive aspects of the systemic factors, the review particularly noted strength in the agency's efforts to expand quality assurance efforts to track outcomes and to support field staff in case management activities. Although the review determined that the State meets the requirements for substantial conformity in each of the systemic factors, the factors were not equally strong throughout the state. In particular, the State will need to assure consistent application of case review requirements and the services available to children and families across the State as it develops its plan to improve the outcomes for children and families.

## **Findings Related to Safety, Permanency, and Well-Being**

The following discussion is a synopsis of the findings with regard to the seven outcomes:

### ***Safety Outcome 1: Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect.***

**Status: Substantial Conformity**

Reviewers rated 39 of the 43 applicable cases (90%) for this outcome as substantially achieved. The State was found to be initiating investigations of abuse and neglect in a timely manner and making adequate efforts to avoid repeat maltreatment of children. The State also met the national standards for the two statewide data indicators associated with this outcome. The State's performance on the incidence of repeat maltreatment was 4.48%, compared to the national standard of 6.1% or less. The State's performance on the incidence of maltreatment while in foster care was .29%, compared to the national standard of 0.57% or less.

### ***Safety Outcome 2: Children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate.***

**Status: Not in Substantial Conformity**

Reviewers rated 25 out of 35 applicable cases as substantially achieved for this outcome, representing 72% of the cases reviewed, compared to the 90% that is required for a determination of substantial conformity. The services that the agency provides to families to prevent out of home placement and its assessment for continuing risks to children were both areas that reviewers determined to be in need of improvement.

### ***Permanency Outcome 1: Children have permanency and stability in their living situations.***

**Status: Not in Substantial Conformity**

Reviewers rated 16 of the 26 applicable cases for this outcome as substantially achieved, representing 62% of the cases, compared to the 90% required for a determination of substantial conformity. The State met the national standard for one of the four statewide data indicators associated with this outcome, the length of time to achieve reunification, at 83.38%, compared to the national standard of 76.2% or more. The State did not meet the national standards for the remaining three data indicators for this outcome, length of time to achieve adoption (State: 26.02%, national standard: 32% or more), foster care re-entries (State: 10.57%, national standard: 8.6% or less), and the stability of foster care placements (State: 68.63%, national standard: 86.7% or more). In particular, the review determined that children in foster care often experience multiple placements and that there is not a timely achievement of permanency goals for many children in foster care.

### ***Permanency Outcome 2: The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children.***

**Status: Not in Substantial Conformity**

Reviewers rated 19 of 26 applicable cases as substantially achieved for this outcome, representing 73% of the cases reviewed, compared to the 90% required for a determination of substantial conformity to this outcome. The review identified strengths in the Division's efforts to place children in close proximity to their families and communities to support visits between children in foster care and their parents. The review identified needs for improvement in establishing permanency goals for children in foster care promptly, reducing the number of moves experienced by children in foster care, moving children into adoption placements in a more timely manner, preserving significant connections for children in foster care beyond contact with their parents, and making greater use of extended family members as possible placement options for children.

***Well-Being Outcome 1: Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs.***

**Status: Not in Substantial Conformity**

Reviewers rated 30 out of 50 applicable cases for this outcome as substantially achieved, representing 60 % of the cases reviewed, compared to the 90% required for a determination of substantial conformity. Strengths identified in this outcome include an array of services available to families in the more urban parts of the state and the presence of case planning documents in a majority of the cases reviewed. However, reviewers also identified a number of areas needing improvement, including a lack of follow up by the agency in some cases where services were recommended, narrowly focused assessment of needs, limited availability of services in rural parts of the state, lack of attention to the needs of foster parents who are parenting behaviorally challenging children, and a lack of involvement of parents and age-appropriate children in developing their case plans. Also, the review identified problems regarding the quality of visits between agency caseworkers and parents and children in their caseloads, with many visits appearing to be unfocused and perfunctory.

***Well-Being Outcome WB2: Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs.***

**Status: Not in Substantial Conformity**

Reviewers rated 36 out of 44 applicable cases as substantially achieved for this outcome, representing 82% of the cases reviewed, compared to the 90% required for a determination of substantial conformity. The review determined the agency's use of comprehensive assessments of children including their educational needs, provided by The University of Arkansas for Medical Services, to be a strength. However, reviewers also determined that the educational recommendations from these assessments were not always followed.

***Well-Being Outcome WB3: Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs.***

**Status: Not in Substantial Conformity**

Reviewers rated 34 of 46 applicable cases as substantially achieved for this outcome, representing 74% of the cases reviewed, compared to the 90% required for a determination of substantial conformity. The review determined that initial medical and mental health screenings were occurring in a timely manner. However, there were a number of cases in which the recommendations from the screenings were not followed by the agency.

## **Findings Related to the Systemic Factors**

The following discussion is a synopsis of the findings with regard to the seven systemic factors:

### ***Statewide Information System***

#### **Status: Substantial Conformity**

Arkansas' Children's Information Reporting System (CHRIS) is the DCFS statewide information system. The system does not yet completely conform to the Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) requirements and ACF is continuing to work with the State to develop a final corrective action plan to complete SACWIS development. However, for purposes of the one State plan requirement subject to the CFS review, the system can readily identify the status, demographic characteristics, location and placement goals for every child in the state's foster care system currently and in the immediately preceding 12 months and is, therefore, in substantial conformity. Stakeholders reported that CHRIS allows for the development and regular distribution of several caseload and management analysis tools that assist agency managers in tracking the status of casework activity and resource utilization on a regular basis. The system was designed as a worker-based system and, as a result, provides numerous automated utilities to assist field staff in their day-to-day case management needs. Further, the state has plans to use more reports from CHRIS in its continuous quality improvement efforts.

### ***Case Review System***

#### **Status: Substantial Conformity**

Reviewers evaluate the following five areas for this systemic factor, and no more than one area may be identified as an area needing improvement for a determination of substantial conformity: written case plans developed jointly with the child's parents, the process for the periodic review of children in foster care, procedures for permanency hearings to be held every 12 months for children in foster care, procedures for termination of parental rights, and notification of foster parents, pre-adoptive parents, and relative caregivers of reviews and hearings. The one area determined to be an area needing improvement is the requirement pertaining to having written case plans developed jointly with the child's parents. Case plans were present in most of the records that were reviewed, although the content of case plans seemed to be similar across cases and reviewers identified a need to strengthen the quality of case plans. Further,

reviewers identified a need to ensure consistent involvement of parents, foster parents, and age-appropriate children in the case planning process throughout the life of the case. The remaining areas reviewed for this systemic factor were determined to be strengths.

### ***Quality Assurance System***

#### **Status: Substantial Conformity**

Reviewers evaluate the following two areas for this systemic factor and both must be determined to be strengths for a determination of substantial conformity: standards in place that ensure that children in foster care are provided quality services that protect their safety and health, and the operation of an identifiable quality assurance system. Both areas were determined to be strengths in Arkansas. The State demonstrated efforts to develop and put into operation several procedures and systems to assure the health and safety of children in state custody, including uniform standards for certifying foster and adoptive homes. Reviewers particularly noted the agency's efforts to expand its quality assurance efforts to track outcomes and to support field staff in case management activities.

### ***Training***

#### **Status: Substantial Conformity**

Reviewers evaluate the following three areas for this systemic factor and no more than one may be determined to be an area needing improvement for a determination of substantial conformity: the initial staff development and training program for child welfare staff, the ongoing training program for child welfare staff, and the training for current and prospective foster and adoptive parents and staff of licensed or approved child care facilities. The review determined all three areas to be strengths in Arkansas. The State has invested significant resources in providing initial and on going training opportunities for caseworkers and foster care providers. The State's training academy approach provides a means for consistent delivery of training to staff. In addition, there are local efforts in place that allow less experienced staff to be mentored by tenured staff as they become acquainted with the expectations of their assignments. Stakeholders who had been involved with the Division of Children and Family Services over several years noted that the training process has significantly improved in recent years. The review also determined that there are some specific areas in which additional or more in-depth training is needed for staff and foster care providers in order to more adequately prepare them for the demands of their work.

### ***Service Array***

#### **Status: Substantial Conformity**

Reviewers evaluate the following three areas for this systemic factor and no more than one may be determined to be an area needing improvement for a determination of substantial conformity: the array of services to meet the needs of children and families served by the State child welfare agency, the accessibility of those services to children and families, and the ability of the agency to tailor the services to the individual needs of

children and families. The review determined that the array of services and the individualizing of the services to the needs of children and families were strengths in Arkansas, but that accessibility of the services is an area needing improvement. The state has an extensive network of services in place to address a majority of needs of children and families in the child welfare system. The Division has expanded the resources available to provide services through the use of the Targeted Case Management option under Title XIX (Medicaid). Staff has been assigned to public school campuses throughout the state to establish partnerships with the school systems. Stakeholders were also very positive about the "Together We Can" initiative, which attempts to facilitate collaboration to improve services for children and their families. The problems with accessing services were most notable in the lack of some essential services and qualified service providers in rural parts of the state. Improvements in this area are needed to assure that all children and families have access to the services they needed to achieve positive outcomes.

#### ***Agency Responsiveness to the Community***

##### **Status: Substantial Conformity**

Reviewers evaluate the following three areas for this systemic factor and no more than one may be determined to be an area needing improvement for a determination of substantial conformity: the agency's ongoing consultation and collaboration with other family and child-serving agencies and organizations, the development of annual progress reports pursuant to its State plan, and coordination of services with other Federal or federally assisted programs serving the same populations. The review determined that all three areas were strengths in Arkansas. The agency has implemented several initiatives to engage communities in the shared responsibility for the well-being of children across the state. The managers and administrators have initiated state and local efforts to involve internal and external stakeholders in planning for system development and improvement. The Division's present efforts are expected to effectively address the concern raised by some stakeholders that it was not always clear who should be engaged to advise the agency on the needs of children and families throughout the state.

#### ***Foster and Adoptive Parent Licensing, Recruitment and Retention***

##### **Status: Substantial Conformity**

Reviewers evaluate the following five areas for this systemic factor and no more than one may be determined to be an area needing improvement for a determination of substantial conformity: the State's standards for licensing foster family homes and child care institutions, the equal application of the standards to all licensed or approved homes and institutions, the procedures for conducting criminal background checks for prospective foster and adoptive parents, the State's efforts to ensure the diligent recruitment of foster and adoptive families, and the use of cross-jurisdictional resources to facilitate timely adoptive or permanent placements for waiting children. The review determined that all five areas were strengths in Arkansas. However, despite the strengths identified in the State's licensing standards and its ongoing efforts to recruit care providers to meet the needs of children in substitute care, the review also identified some challenges in this

area. For example, there are continuing needs to build the pool of available resources in relation to the various ethnic backgrounds represented in the state, as well as for those children with significant therapeutic needs, and to support caregivers of these children with adequate services.

## Program Improvement Planning

The program improvement phase of the Child and Family Services Review is the most significant aspect of the review process. The State must develop a program improvement plan that addresses each of the five outcomes determined not to be in substantial conformity, and submit the plan to the ACF Regional Office within 90 days of receiving this final report. The safety outcome issues are to be given priority in the plan and those issues must be addressed in less than two years. The staff of ACF Region VI and the West Central Hub will work in partnership with DCFS and other stakeholders in the State to develop the program improvement plan.